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## Celebrity Curators: Presenters Turn to High-Profile Dance Artists To Inspire New Programming Directions [Part 2]

April 3, 2018

**Editor's note:** This is the second of a two-part series on curation by celebrity dancers. If you missed part 1, visit [here](#).

By Steve Sucato



Presenting organizations have demonstrated an interest in inviting high-profile dancers and choreographers to curate programs in recent seasons. Presenters interviewed reported their collaborations with guest curators as being both monetarily successful while also meeting specific programmatic goals. In addition, some reported greater awareness of their organization's other programming and an increase in their website and social media traffic.

"We were able to gain attraction digitally that we had never had before," said Meg Booth, director of dance programming at The Kennedy Center. "The net result was increased visibility of the program and the dialogue around ballet, which we are thrilled about."

While the attraction for presenters to enlist high profile dance artists as curators is clear, what drives those artists to want to curate?

American Ballet Theatre principal dancer **Isabella Boylston** summed up her attraction to the idea that led to her curating the *Ballet Sun Valley Festival* this past summer. "I had been dreaming of curating my own show for a while," said Boylston. "When I was back in my hometown, Sun Valley, Idaho, a few years ago scouting out a wedding venue, I came across the Sun Valley Pavilion. It's a gorgeous venue and I immediately saw that it had the potential to present a world-class ballet performance."



Boylston, who also produced and self-presented the festival, made a wish list of the dancers she wanted involved and was fortunate to have the majority of them sign on. "I tried to select repertory that was meaningful to me and that the audience would enjoy, incorporating choreographers who I've worked with such as Justin Peck, Pontus Lidberg, Alexei Ratmanský, Christopher Wheeldon and Gemma Bond."

San Francisco Ballet soloist **James Sofranko** turned his desire to curate into the contemporary dance project *SFDanceworks*. His motivation was missing seeing contemporary dance companies like Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Netherlands Dance Theatre in their tours to San Francisco.

"I wanted to create a vehicle for contemporary dance; that ended up becoming *SFDanceworks*," explained Sofranko. "With it, I wanted to curate and show works from previous generations as well as world premieres — a representation of the past, present and future of

contemporary dance.”

In Los Angeles, the Music Center’s President and CEO Rachel Moore feels opportunities to curate also provide dancers — some mentioned in this article — with an introduction of the type of curatorial work an artistic director must do for a professional company. “So often, talented dancers are tapped for artistic director positions without having had any real experience of what the position entails,” said Moore. *BalletNOW*™, “in a very small way, helps [dancers] experience the challenges of curating, casting, scheduling, and working within a budget, and thus gives them a taste of what it means to take on a leadership position in the dance field.”

That rang true for Sofranko, who felt his time spent on *SFDanceworks* played a key role in his being chosen in January as the new artistic director of Michigan’s Grand Rapids Ballet.



## Advice for Curation

For those presenting organizations and others interested in developing new programming options by following in the curatorial footsteps of The Kennedy Center, Jacobs Pillow and The Music Center, here’s some advice from pros:

“Find dancers that you either have a relationship with or you feel can do the job,” said Booth. “Not every artist is going to be cut out for curating a program such as *Ballet Across America*.”

Pamela Tatge, director of the Jacob’s Pillow Dance concurred. “Not all dancers and choreographers have the ability to stand back and understand lineages and contextualize work, but some really do,” said Tatge. “Some are regularly looking at how their own work relates to the past, present and future and have that same lens when they look at other artists. Future artists we ask to curate will have to have that ability.”

For Moore, the nature of the partnerships was paramount. “It is important to choose curatorial partners whose work you respect and with whom you share a common vision,” Moore stated. She added: “Truthfully, there is no ‘formula’ for a program of this nature. However, there is a sensibility or aesthetic value system that we employ. The artist needs to have an interesting viewpoint, strong balletic credentials and a respect for ballet’s legacy, as well as a willingness to see where the field can go. On a more prosaic level, it is also a matter of timing and the resources it takes to mount a presentation of this nature.”

Booth also encourages those looking to emulate what The Kennedy Center did. By capturing the artist/curator’s voice in films/videos, they had an attractive mini-documentary to market and promote *Ballet Across America*. The additional media gave audiences insight into **Misty Copeland**’s and **Justin Peck**’s thinking in curating their programs. It also proved hugely beneficial in working with the pair and, ultimately, to the success of *Ballet Across America*.

Of the curating artists themselves, **Tiler Peck** had these thoughts on her experience: “I really thought as curator I was supposed to pick the dancers and repertoire and that was it. I had no idea that I would need to set the tempos of each piece with the conductor, put together the rehearsal schedule in a way to make sure everything got rehearsed, pick the dressing rooms for the dancers, and so many other wonderful specifics. I definitely had to learn many things while wearing this new curatorial hat and was thrilled to have to learn and handle all of these different tasks.”



Boylston also found curating to be a learning process, often in unexpected ways. “I think I would be a little less ambitious with new commissions in the future,” she said. “There were many problems to solve. We had to rent a sprung floor from San Francisco because the Pavilion didn’t have a dance floor; we needed visas for the international stars; we needed to build a set for Gemma’s [Bond’s] commission; and we needed to bring in 25 musicians and a conductor and build a makeshift orchestra pit. Basically there was no infrastructure in place so we had to build everything from the ground up.”

Despite the challenges, Boylston’s advice to other would-be curators: “Go for it! It always seemed like such an intimidating undertaking, but you just have to chip away at it step by step. I’d also suggest designating tasks to other people that you trust. Sometimes you have to let go of control a little to get the job done. Also, be open-minded and willing to compromise.”

Sofranko agreed: “Don’t be daunted by the idea of it, just start doing it. You can think about and plan every detail but, ultimately, you just need to put yourself out there. You can learn everything along the way. Be confident in your vision and the details will fall into place.”



A former dancer turned arts writer and critic living in Ohio, **Steve Sucato** studied ballet and modern dance with Arline Ashton Hay, Robert Steele, Patricia Heigel-Tanner, and Kathy Short Gracenin. During his dance career he performed numerous classical and contemporary roles sharing the stage with noted dancers Robert LaFosse, Antonia Franceschi, Stacy Caddell, Joseph Duell, Robert Wallace, Sandra Brown and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Sucato has a degree in communications from The Pennsylvania State University and is chairman emeritus of the Dance Critics Association, an international association of dance journalists. His writing credits include articles and reviews on dance and the arts for *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), *The Buffalo News* (Buffalo), *Pittsburgh City Paper* (Pittsburgh), *Erie Times-News* (Erie), *ArtVoice* (Buffalo) and *Dance Magazine*, *Pointe*, *Dance International*, *Dance Studio Life*, *Dance Teacher*, among others. On the web you can find his writing in [ExploreDance.com](http://ExploreDance.com), *DanceTabs*, *BalletCo*, and *Ballet-Dance Magazine*. Steve is also associate editor of [ExploreDance](http://ExploreDance.com) and the creator of the arts blog [Arts Air](http://ArtsAir.com).

#### Photo credits

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Photo 2: Isabella Boylston and Calvin Royal III in Isabella Boylston's *Ballet Sun Valley Festival*. Photo: Steve Dondero.

Photo 3: Joseph Wiggan and Josette Wiggan-Freund in *Harmony: Tap in Motion* in *TIRELESS: A Tap Dance Experience*, curated by Michelle Dorrance. Photo: Christopher Duggan.

Photo 4: Tiler Peck dances George Balanchine's *Allegro Brillante* with Marcelo Gomes, Preston Chamblee, Harrison Coll, Rachel Hutsell, Lauren King, Claire Kretzschmar, Lars Nelson, Taylor Stanley and Indiana Woodward in The Music Center's *BalletNOW*. Photo courtesy of The Music Center

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